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NH Maple Makes the Grade

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The 2005 New Hampshire Maple season ended up with total production volume somewhat below average. But, it's important for consumers to recognize that just because the total amount of syrup produced in the state was less than usual, the quality of the maple syrup that was made was as good as ever – in fact better than average, overall.

Syrup quality is defined by the state's Maple Grading Law which establishes official grades for maple syrup. There are four consumer grades for maple syrup in New Hampshire: Grade A Light Amber, Grade A Medium Amber, Grade A Dark Amber and Grade B. Traditionally, the light and medium amber grades were generally thought to be superior to the darker grades of syrup. Light Amber syrup is usually made at the beginning of the season and represents a small percentage of total production. As the season progresses and temperatures warm, the color of the syrup produced gets darker. Today, many consumers prefer the richer flavor of Medium Amber and Dark Amber syrup.

Yet color is just one of several quality factors. First of all, maple syrup must be within a certain range for density. Density is a measure of the viscosity or thickness of a liquid. Maple producers measure and adjust density as necessary based on readings made with a hydrometer or refractometer. Syrup that is too light in density is too thin, it will be more watery, weak in flavor and it may spoil or ferment in storage. On the other hand, syrup that is too high in density will be too thick to pour easily and the excess sugars present will eventually settle out on the bottom of the container in the form of sugar crystals.

After maple sap is concentrated to the correct density, it is then carefully filtered to remove impurities. Grade A syrup must be clean and practically clear according to the state's grading law. Maple producers next place a sample of a given lot of syrup in a color grading set to determine which color grade term is to be applied. Light Amber syrup must be as light or lighter in color than the light amber standard in the grading kit, and so on for the darker shades of amber. Grade B syrup is darker than the Dark Amber color standard in the grading kit.

The sugarmaker makes the final and most important grade determination based on flavor. All color shades of Grade A syrup must have a good maple flavor free of objectionable flavors or odors. Grade B syrup needs only to have a fairly good maple flavor and needs to be free from serious damage. Some Grade B syrup may have good flavor but it may also have a very strong flavor. Because it may be quite strong, most maple lovers usually prefer Grade B syrup for cooking.

Finally, the syrup is hot packed in cans, glass bottles or plastic jugs. If kept unopened, syrup will maintain quality for a long time without refrigeration. For long term storage its best to store syrup in a cool dark place or in the refrigerator.

Not every grade of syrup will be available at every sugarhouse. Maple syrup is a product of nature and the grades of syrup available in any year will reflect the particular weather pattern for that year. Whatever grade you buy, you may be confident that New Hampshire maple syrup is a delicious and pure product that results from the labors of the sugarmaker working in concert with nature.

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